

Interwar Germany

Name:

Date:

The Weimar Republic was the government that preceded the Nazi government. The birth of this government was at the defeat end of the First World War. After four long years of devastating warfare, the new government was left with the unhappy task and responsibility of peace negotiations. The Republic was forced to sign a treaty that placed the blame of the way solely on the shoulders of the distraught Germans. It was then the burdened government began its falter. The short-lived Weimar Republic has become a symbol of many things to subsequent observers. To Nazis, it embodied the humiliation of an imposed settlement and an “un-German” cosmopolitanism that they considered decadent. To post-Nazi Germans, it was a beacon of pre-Hitler democracy. Finally, to many cultural scholars, the period of the Weimar Republic was a fascinating time when the old and the new in German society collided and blended; often producing enduring works of art and literature.

I. Politics and Government

The Weimar constitution provided all of the basic civil rights common to other democratic countries: universal suffrage and freedom of speech, of press, of movement, and of association. Although the right to private property was recognized, plans were made to nationalize several key industries. The reform-minded Friedrich Ebert of the SPD was the Republic’s first president, from 1919 to 1925. He was succeeded by the elderly war hero Paul von Hindenburg, who was president until his death in 1934.

For most Germans, the Weimar government bore the stigma of defeat. In addition, as a parliamentary government, it was opposed on principle by both conservative militarists and revolutionary socialists. Both sides, using private armies, frequently tried to overthrow the government. In 1919 the communist Spartacists under Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg tried unsuccessfully to overturn the government, and in 1920 a much more dangerous rightist military revolt, the Kapp Putsch, was put down.

II. Economic and Political Crises

The economic situation of Germany during the first five postwar years made the political situation even more precarious. Because Germany could not meet reparations requirements, France invaded the industrial center of the Ruhr in 1923, seizing control of all its coal deposits. The German government encouraged the workers to resist passively, and it printed vast amounts of devalued money to pay them. Before July 1922, the value of the Reichsmark had already dropped from about 4 to 493 to the dollar, but during the next 16 months it plummeted to 4.2 trillion to the dollar. The resulting inflation wiped out the savings, pensions, insurance, and other forms of fixed income of most middle-class and working-class Germans.

In 1924 the Dawes Plan was implemented to ease the German reparations burden and provide for foreign loans. The brilliant chancellor and foreign minister Gustav Stresemann reorganized the monetary system and encouraged industrial growth. For the next five years, Germany enjoyed relative peace and prosperity, gradually fulfilling its obligations under the Versailles treaty. In 1925 England, France, Italy, and Germany signed the Treaties of Locarno, which finally established the western borders of Germany and began the withdrawal of occupation forces along the Rhine. In 1926 Germany was admitted to the League of Nations.

The worldwide depression of the 1930s, however, plunged the country once more into disaster. Millions of unemployed Germans, disillusioned by capitalist democracy, turned either to the Communist Party or to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), the party of National Socialism, or Nazism. By 1930 the Nazis were the second largest party in the Reichstag.

III. The Third Reich (1933-1945)

Probably no regime in the 20th century or any other has been so closely identified with institutionalized terror and evil as that of the Third Reich under the control of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. Its rise and demise had worldwide consequences, and its legacy continued to shape the identity of Germans long afterward.

IV. Hitler and National Socialism

A failed artist and former army corporal in World War I, Adolf Hitler hated aristocrats, capitalists, Bolsheviks (communists), and liberals, as well as Jews and other so-called non-Aryans. He had already tried to topple the government in the ill-fated “beer hall putsch” of 1923. This early abortive attempt at revolution occurred when Hitler (then chairman of the NSDAP), the right-wing general Ludendorff, and several Nazi supporters stormed a Munich beer hall and forced local political leaders to declare their support for the “national revolution.” Nazi attempts to take



over the Bavarian War Ministry were quickly defeated, however, and Hitler was sentenced to five years in prison for treason.

Released after serving less than one year, he immediately rejoined the NSDAP, and in 1926 again became its leader. Hitler used his public speaking gifts to win supporters for the Nazi cause, seizing every opportunity to denounce the unpopular Weimar government as weak and decadent. He also proposed giving the jobs of Jews—whom he painted as parasitical and villainous—to deserving Germans. In return for restoring Germany’s former glory and honor, he asked for the unconditional loyalty and obedience of all patriotic Germans. To reinforce his message, his followers, brown-shirted storm troopers, sporadically harassed and attacked communists, Jews, and other enemies of the National Socialists.

In 1927 the entire Nazi membership was only 40,000. Yet by the depths of the depression of 1932, the Nazis were the most successful party in the country, although still garnering only 38 percent of the vote. Many right-wing military and civilian leaders thought that Hitler could be effectively manipulated and so, with the backing of several prominent businessmen, they succeeded in having him named chancellor on January 30, 1933.

Their belief that Hitler would be a Nazi figurehead was soon shattered, however. To secure supreme power for himself as the nation’s *Führer* (leader), Hitler blamed a fire in the Reichstag building on the communists, banned the Communist Party, and called new elections. Even in this highly coercive atmosphere, the Nazis still did not obtain an absolute majority in the new Reichstag. Nevertheless, together with their political allies, they succeeded in passing the revolutionary Enabling Act, which granted the government dictatorial powers over all aspects of German life.

	Economic	Political	Social (also use pages 770-771 in your textbook)
Description during Interwar period			
How this contributed to the rise of Hitler			

Why do you think the Weimar Republic was so weak?